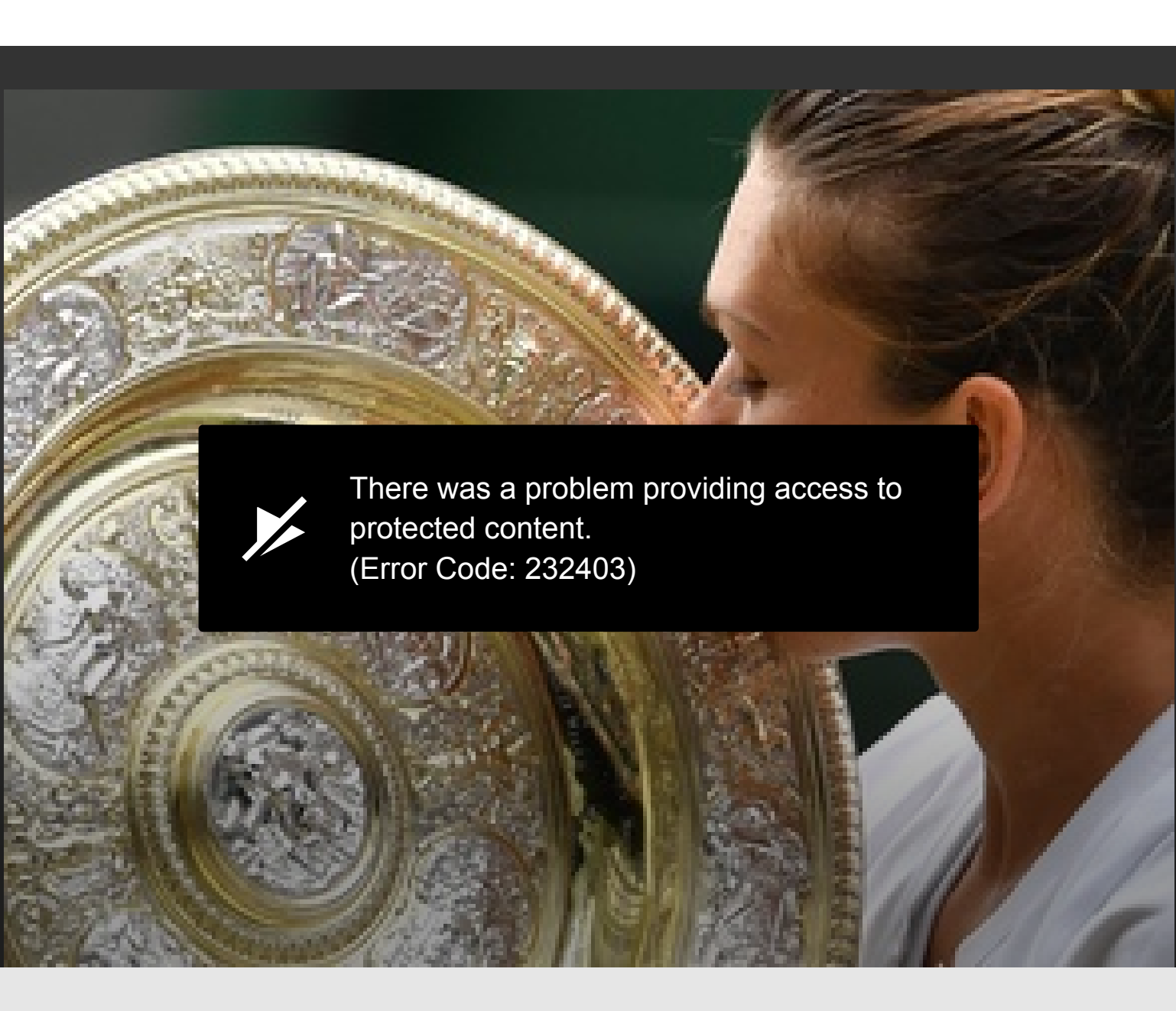
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The old Simona Halep would be jealous of version 2.0—a Wimbledon champ

THE OLD SIMONA HALEP WOULD BE JEALOUS OF VERSION 2.0—A WIMBLEDON CHAMP

Halep says she's "chill"; but it might be another "ch" word—channeled—that best describes her Wimbledon performance.

By **Steve Tignor**

July 13, 2019

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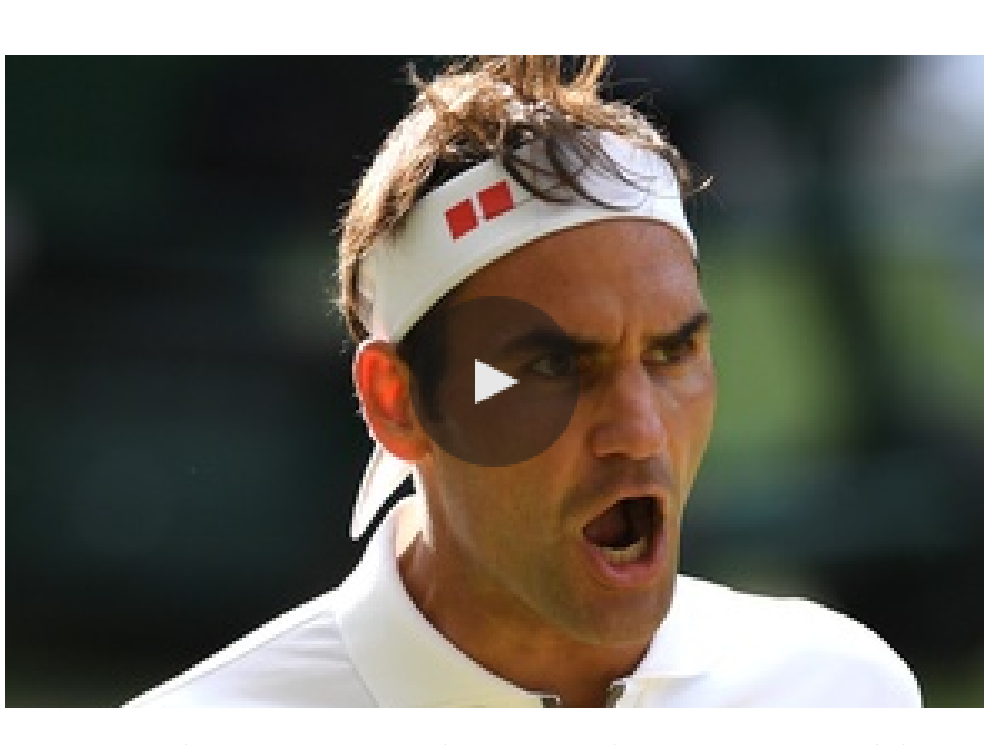
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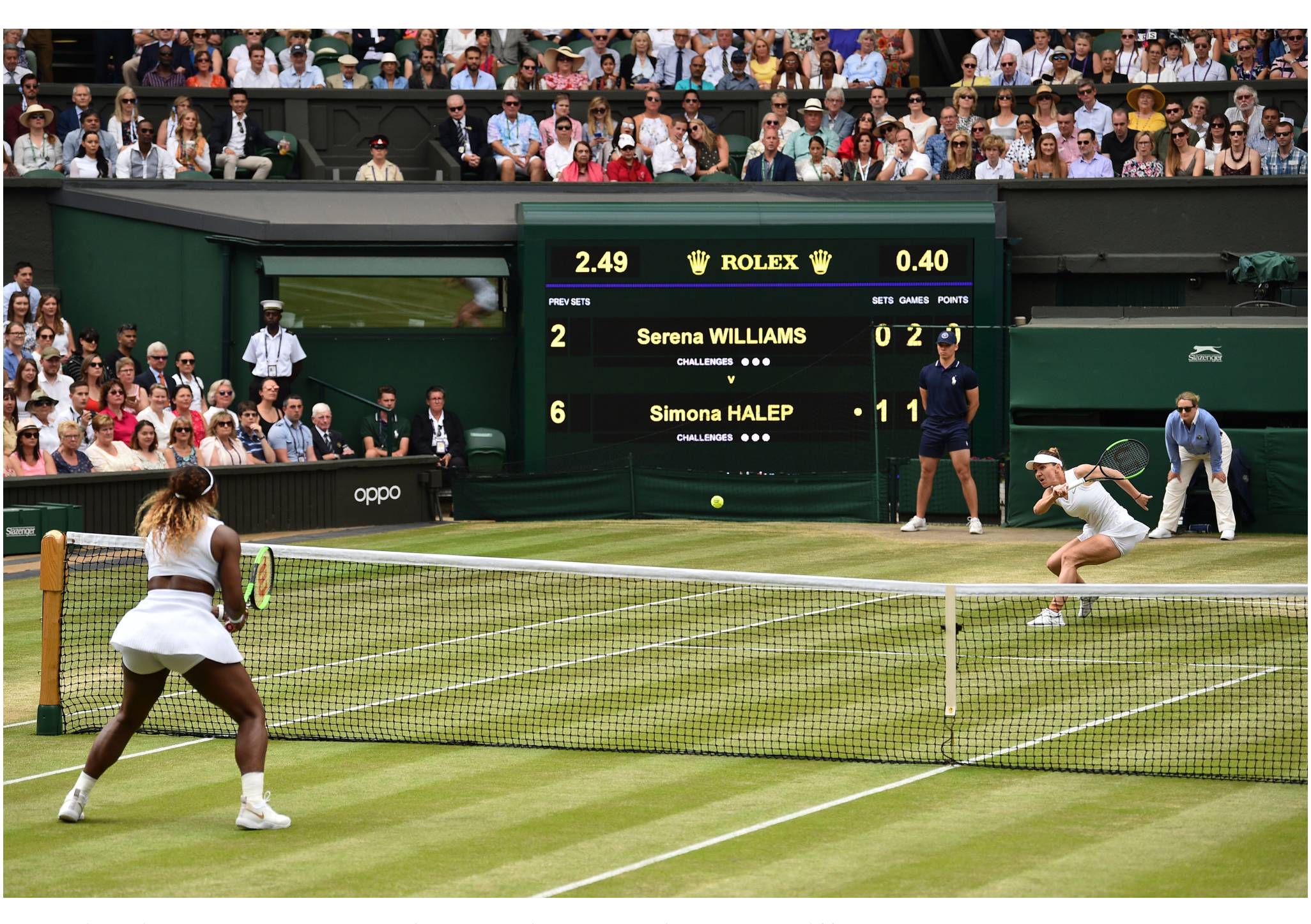
If the old Simona Halep were still around, she'd be jealous of the new Simona Halep.

The old Simona lost her first three Grand Slam finals in painfully close matches. When she finally did win one, against Sloane Stephens at the 2018 French Open, she had to labor mightily to come back from a set and a break down.

When things went south for the old Simona, she would rush from one point to the next; her coach once threatened to quit if she didn't get her act together. At 5'6", she struggled to stand toe to toe with her taller, more powerful opponents; against the most powerful of them all, Serena Williams, Halep won just one match in her first 10 tries. The old Simona also hated playing on grass. This wasn't surprising, considering that hadn't been a single grass court in her home country, Romania. She lost in the first or second round at Wimbledon four times; the one time she made the semifinals, she hurt her ankle.

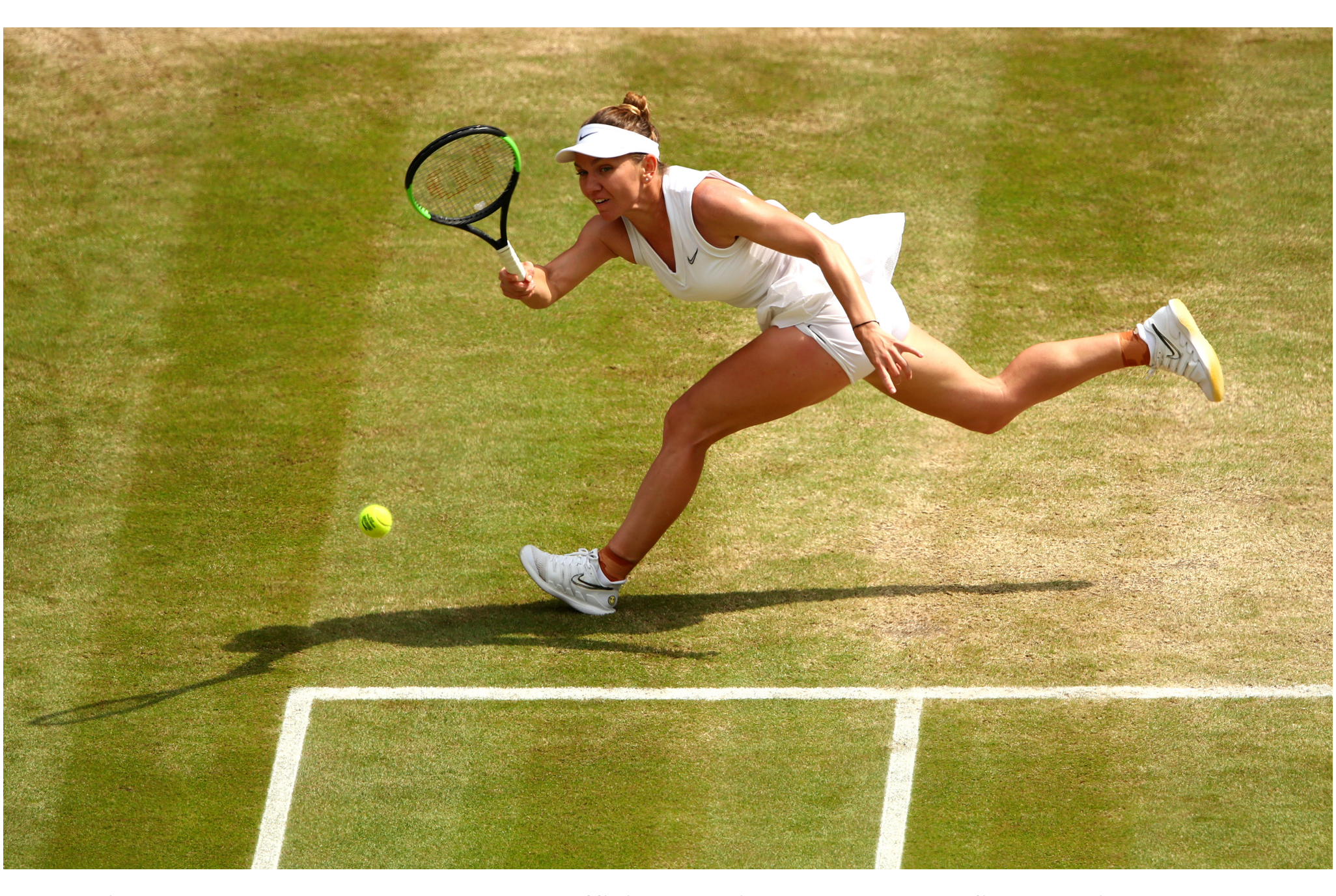


But this Wimbledon, the new Simona said, was going to be different. She had a new coach. She was putting the past behind her. She had her emotions under control. She was "chill." Most important, she finally felt like she knew how to move, and how to play, on grass. Frankly, I wasn't sure if I believed her; Halep has turned over a lot of new leaves in the past. But the proof is in the results, and there's no denying that what Halep did over the last two weeks was very much a new thing for her.

In the third round, she beat Victoria Azarenka, a player she had once struggled against, 6-3, 6-1. In the fourth round, she ended the dream run of 15-year-old Cori Gauff in a pressure-filled contest. And then, in her last three matches, she faced three opponents—Shuai Zhang, Elina Svitolina and Serena Williams—who had a combined 15-5 record against her. The New Simona beat them all in straight sets. Most spectacularly, she made just three unforced errors in beating Serena, 6-2, 6-2, in 56 minutes in Saturday's final. If winning her first French Open title last year was the effort of a lifetime for Halep, winning her first Wimbledon, on her worst surface, was a breeze.

"I'm very sure that was the best match of my life," a still slightly incredulous Halep said after the final. "...I'm happy about what I achieved these two weeks. I can't describe how I feel winning Wimbledon. It's pretty special."

Asked when she believed she could win the tournament, she laughed and said, "Today."



When did Halep's grass-court turnaround officially begin? In the quarterfinals against Zhang, she was down 1-4, and nearly 1-5, in the first set. The old Simona might have pulled the mental ripcord and rushed into the second set, but not the new version. Maybe her comeback propelled her into the final weekend with a new level of confidence, because there really was something different about Halep when she faced Svitolina and Serena. During the points and between them, she played and moved with a controlled sense of aggression and a steady intensity. Halep likes to use the word "chill" to describe her new state of mind; I'd say another "ch" word is also appropriate: "channeled."

"I always play well when I have emotions," Halep said. "I don't try to ignore them or I don't try to fight against them. I try to take them as a positive and just try to control them to the right—to put them in the right way, which I did today. That's why I was able to do the best match."

It only took two points on Saturday to see that Halep's semifinal momentum had carried over into the final. Serena hit a forehand approach, and Halep went back crosscourt for a clean passing-shot winner. From that point on, whatever Serena did, Halep had the answer. Yes, she ran everything down, and only made three unforced errors, but she also forced forced Serena to hit from uncomfortable positions, over and over again. She defended offensively, and made hitting on the dead run look easy. Halep, who spent the majority of her Friday practice hitting returns, read Serena's serve well and held her to just two aces.

As for Serena, she started the match with her feet frozen to the court. She struggled to get a ball over the net in the early going, and was down 0-4 after 11 minutes. In the past, when she's been misfiring in Slam finals, Serena has had success dialing back the risk level on her shots, but today that only gave Halep more opportunities to get her teeth into the rallies.

"I just was trying different things," Serena said. "Today nothing really helped. But also made way too many errors for a lot of stuff to work."

"I think she was getting so many balls back. I do have a strategy for players that do get a lot of balls back, which I thought about far too late. I think I was overhitting it, trying to go for too much."

This is the third Grand Slam tournament in the last 12 months in which Serena has looked like her old, unbeatable self in the semifinals, only to end up being beaten, in straight sets, in the final. From 1999 to 2015, Serena was 21-4 in Grand Slam finals; since the start of 2016, she's 2-5. Even she acknowledged today that it might help her to reach a few non-Slam finals now and then.

"I just have to figure out a way to win a final," Serena said. "Maybe it is playing other finals outside of Grand Slams would be really helpful just to kind of get in the groove..."

But Serena also acknowledged that Halep "just played great." It will be the image of the Romanian motoring from side to side on Centre Court and firing balls into the corners that will last from this day. Wimbledon has a brand new champion, and at 27, Halep would seem to have a brand new, and even more promising, career ahead of her.

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